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ABSTRACT

The history and current operation of the University of Tennessee open-circuit television project are reviewed. Planning was begun in 1972, and the first courses were broadcast during the summer of that year. Through the winter of 1975, a total of 336 students had enrolled either for credit or audit in open-circuit courses which have concentrated on the humanities and social sciences. Some student reactions to the programing are also given.
(DGC)

A REPORT ON THE OPEN-CIRCUIT TELEVISION PROJECT
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

BY

KENNETH C. BOHRINGER

The mission of the University of Tennessee is education, research, and service. For the past four years, various programs of a nontraditional variety have been launched in an effort to meet more effectively our educational and service obligations. One of these is the open-circuit television project of the University's Division of Continuing Education. This project and its purposes are in many ways similar to those of Britain's Open University, an institution which "combines specially written course material with weekly half-hour radio and television broadcasts and fortnightly local tutorials to bring quality higher education to those who were previously unable to further their education."¹ For some time, the appeal of such a "university without walls" has been growing in the United States, and recently the Committee on Higher Adult Education of the American Council on Education made reference to the "social mandate" which "includes for the first time in our history the goal of providing postsecondary educational opportunities for everyone regardless of age."² The Committee, mindful of "America's historical commitment to and adventuresomeness in postsecondary education," went on to suggest the possible desirability of developing "new institutions serving nontraditional students or offering nontraditional programs" that would extend beyond the physical limits of the campus.³ Closer to home, in autumn, 1971, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools realigned its positions on so-called "special [i.e. nontraditional] activities" relating to off-campus degree programs. This change was not a relaxation of standards but a realistic adjustment in light of new methods of satisfying community needs.

In August of that year, the University of Tennessee, appreciating its own "social mandate," created the position of Vice President for Continuing Education. According to the by-laws of the Board of Trustees, this officer was to "develop and recommend to the President the policies and programs required for effective offering of educational opportunities, including attainment of college-level degrees, to qualified students of all ages and walks of life who pursue knowledge outside the traditional on-campus setting." The following month, Charles H. Weaver was named to this position, and in an early memorandum he advocated "the extension of existing campus programs totally into non-campus modes." "What is desired," he went on to say, "is an extended university--an extension of all of the academic processes of the university totally to off-campus or non-campus operation." He further noted that "preliminary discussions have been held with administrators of the statewide educational television system, and it is hoped that a significant number of programs directly involved in the extension process can be developed."

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By January, 1972, Weaver was able to announce that he planned soon to have "one or more courses on open-circuit TV." This unique project of broadcasting throughout the state was the subject of his letter of January 13, 1972, to Edward J. Boling, the University's president, in which he urged "the initiation of several system-wide programs for the summer and fall of 1972." Before long, this proposal crystallized into a plan to offer for credit five freshman courses, a full quarter's work, during the summer term. Weaver outlined the format to be used: It would consist, he said, "of televising an on-campus class as an event. Off-campus registrations will be handled in advance through the Department of Correspondence [now the Center for Extended Learning], and credit will be earned through the correspondence procedures now in existence. Off-campus students will work the same assignments as on-campus students and will take examinations with on-campus students at the same time and at appropriate locations in the University of Tennessee system." This commitment to maintain "resident quality" in the program has been and remains a primary concern of everyone associated with it. A related concern was with the student-teacher relationship that is often, of necessity, more remote in long-distance study than in resident work; it was therefore desired that the television instructor or an adjunct teacher have as much personal contact with his students as time and geography would allow. Weaver also pointed out that the open-circuit approach would reach and appeal to a variety of groups: "Included are the high school graduates who intend to attend the University of Tennessee and who would like to take courses for credit before actually coming to the campus; students already enrolled in the University of Tennessee who would like to earn credit while away from the campus; and working adults. In addition these courses may be attractive to citizens who have a special interest in the operation of the University of Tennessee, such as parents of students or potential students."

Aside from the obvious benefits afforded by the "window on the classroom" approach, it offers a number of other advantages quite different in nature and possibly even more far-reaching in their effects. According to Frank A. Lester, Director of the Department of Television Services, UT Knoxville, such a window "can serve, as perhaps can no other instrument of Continuing Education, to reassure the constituency that the classroom (with or without walls) has not sunk to a Circus Maximus of discontent, dissatisfaction, advocacy of the total destruction of the system, anarchy, and waste of tax revenues. Furthermore, this window can also confirm that the University classroom has not become a place either in which the professor is bound and gagged and in which new ideas, new methods, and creativity are suppressed."

During the early months of 1972, Kenneth D. Wright, Associate Vice President for Continuing Education, developed plans for the summer offering. He was assisted by Mr. Lester, Charles W. Hartsell, Director of the Center for Extended Learning, and members of the Division staff. It was decided to televise the following courses: Anthropology 2010 (Human Origins), with William M. Bass, UT Knoxville; Economics 101 (Macroeconomics), with Ziad Keilany, UT Chattanooga; English 1110 (English Composition), with Carolyn Martin, UT Knoxville; Mathematics 1110 (General Mathematics), with C.G. Doss,

UT Knoxville; and Psychology 2110 (General Psychology), with Milton D. Simmons, UT Martin. All but one of the courses were scheduled to be taped as "events" (as was originally intended). Math 1110 would use the standard closed-circuit format, which does not simulate a classroom situation. In his letter to President Boling of March 17, 1972, Commissioner E.C. Stimbert of the Tennessee Department of Education announced approval of the open-circuit project. "I, too," he wrote, "believe the possibilities are great for such a program."

Public response to the first summer television term was as follows: Forty-eight students were registered, 12 of whom enrolled in more than one course. Fifteen of the 48 audited a total of 20 courses, while the remainder took 41 courses for credit. In the latter group, seven withdrew (from nine courses), 11 did not take final examinations (in 12 courses), and 15 successfully completed 20 courses with grades of C or above. The success of this project led in autumn, 1972, to rebroadcasts of Anthropology 2010 and Mathematics 1110 with a total of 22 students enrolled in the two courses. The Winter-Spring Quarter of 1973 saw the return of English 1110 and Psychology 2110 and the addition of History 2210 (American Survey, 1492-1836), taught by John W. Cooke, UT Nashville--48 students registered for this term. The following summer, five courses were again offered: English 1110, History 2210, Mathematics 1110, Psychology 2110, and a new course, Anthropology 2020 (Prehistoric Archaeology), with Charles H. Faulkner, UT Knoxville.

Courses added since then include Mathematics 1810-20 (Analytic Geometry and Calculus), with Sue Boren, UT Martin; Law Enforcement 3800 (Psychology for Law Enforcement), with William H. Zachry, Jr., UT Martin; Psychology 2120 (General Psychology), with D.I. Blom, UT Martin; Anthropology 2030 (Human Cultures), with Harry M. Lindquist, UT Knoxville; English 2142 (Women Writers in England and America), with Mary P. Richards, UT Knoxville; Special Education 3333 (Education of the Exceptional Child), with Michael C. Hannum, UT Knoxville; Real Estate 2610 (Introduction to Real Estate), with G.T. Ballenger, Jr., UT Knoxville; and English 1510-20, again with Carolyn Martin, UT Knoxville. Mrs. Martin's new courses, part of the recently revamped Liberal Arts curriculum, comprise the entire freshman English requirement on the Knoxville campus.

Through winter, 1975, a total of 336 students had enrolled either for credit or audit in the open-circuit program. Since there is no reliable rating system for public television in Tennessee, it is difficult to estimate with accuracy the number of viewers who have availed themselves of the courses without officially enrolling. Nevertheless, on the basis of the "fan mail" received, it seems safe to number this audience at several thousand.

The success or potential for success of an open-circuit course obviously, in large measure, depends upon the abilities of the teacher, who, as Mr. Lester has said, must be a "talented person, something of a star perhaps, even superstar. He must be mindful that his viewers are consciously or subconsciously comparing him with the professional performer of commercial or public television." That Tennessee's television teachers have gone to the competition wars and--on occasion, at least--fared reasonably well against the high-priced professionals can be seen in the following excerpts from student

correspondence. One Memphis viewer wrote to her instructor: "This week it was a toss-up of missing your Monday's lecture and seeing a concert performance of my favorite opera singer, Franco Corelli, and you won." A history student, styling himself "an unabashed Cookephile," expressed in his letter "how much I am enjoying the Jack Cooke show on WSJK." And a Kingsport businessman, somewhat irked at the time slot given Professor Bass, stated: "I am a great fan of yours and very much enjoy your MWF Anthropology 1 lectures on Channel 2. Walter Cronkite's ratings will suffer, but the choice has been made."

This last comment raises an issue which is noted repeatedly in viewer remarks. An early-evening history student in Knoxville had a logical point for her teacher: "If I listen to your lectures, I miss the 6-7 p.m. news. I wish you came on at a different hour, preferably earlier. I would think others would agree. Anyone interested in history would surely be interested in the news, which is current history." But again, even when times have been inconvenient, most of the instructors have managed successfully. A Nashville businessman, enrolled in a late-night course, wrote to his professor: "Many of my teachers in college could put me to sleep in the middle of the day and I don't go to sleep in your class at 10:00 o'clock p.m. You must be doing something right."

Students have cited reasons as varied as their backgrounds for taking coursework by television. A Memphis woman stated that this type of instruction could "help those who were not able to get a higher education (for one reason or another)" keep their minds "alive and alert." A housewife in Sledge, Mississippi, expressed a similar thought: "I just wanted to do something different during my daily routine." Another student, an inmate of Tennessee State Penitentiary, wrote that he was taking Psychology 2110 "because I am interested in the 'whys' of human existence."

Other reasons show a need for results that are more immediately practical. A mother of four children, "three of whom are members of a swim team," enrolled in psychology to learn more about motivation, and a high school counselor in Summertown related that she was following Mrs. Martin's course "very closely," because she had been assigned to teach composition to a class of college-bound students. Some students have expressed a desire to have the open-circuit project enlarged. An anthropology enrollee in West Memphis, Arkansas, said: "I would enjoy seeing this type of program expanded to many other subjects"; and a Waverly woman noted that she "should like to see many, many courses offered on TV" and pledged she "shall certainly support any effort to accomplish this." Such expansion would, of course, benefit those who have no other avenue to higher education. These are the students who are more apt to take advantage of the offerings and the ones who are the most grateful. A bedridden woman in Memphis wrote: "I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate this opportunity to get started in college."

The need for instruction by broadcast television seems clear from the comments above. One possibility for expansion in the near future concerns broadcasting courses directed toward more specific and select audiences. Three steps in this direction have been taken recently. Special Education 3333 has been aired twice throughout the state in the past year; it was aimed

primarily at a clientele of parents and teachers of exceptional children as well as teachers who needed additional coursework for certification. Another "special" course, broadcast in winter, 1975, is Real Estate 2610; it proved to be popular with homeowners as well as with brokers and affiliate brokers who were working to meet the continuing education requirements of the Tennessee Real Estate Commission. Other courses in this field are planned for the near future. The third area of special interest is nursing. Under the sponsorship of the UT Knoxville School of Nursing, Acute Care I will be videotaped in spring, 1975, and will be offered to nurses anywhere in the state for three continuing education units. Since certification and relicensure are becoming more important for professional standing, a number of markets, in addition to the ones described, seem to be open for broadcast television. Perhaps soon a balance might be achieved in the open-circuit program between courses for selected viewers and those, like basic college English and mathematics, which are fundamental to all academic pursuits.

To conclude, instruction by television, while rarely a money-making enterprise, can be of great value as a public service tool and can provide the means for full extension of the resident product. Instead of having to content himself with a relatively inert and unresponsive study guide, the television student, in addition to the printed material, has the advantages of being able to see and hear his professors. The sometimes abstract and disembodied aspect of the correspondence approach that is purely informational has given place to a medium which highlights appearances, personalities, and on occasion an amusing idiosyncrasy, all of which help humanize long-distance instruction. A good illustration of this is found in a letter from a recent viewer who wrote that one of the high points of History 2210 "occurred when the instructor, in the midst of an impeccable survey of The Critical Period, unceremoniously blew his nose." This delightful piece of student irreverence, whatever else it might prove, stresses the fact that television learning is indeed "the next best thing to being there." This capacity to personalize the abstract is one of the reasons television can be and is being used to bring resident quality to off-campus study. Equally important, the medium permits students, both resident and remote, to work according to similar schedules and under identical requirements and, for all practical purposes, to receive the same amount of personal attention from instructors or adjunct teachers. Finally, off-campus students have access to the library resources of the University. When they register for coursework originating from UT Knoxville, for example, they have check-out privileges identical to those of students in residence; they need only submit their requests by phone or mail and pay the return postage. In these circumstances, an extended program can parallel its campus model in every significant way. That appreciation of this fact is growing in Academe is evident in the "registration break-through" achieved by the Center for Extended Learning in spring, 1974. Permission was granted on an experimental basis for television students to apply for formal admission to the University and earn resident credits. Without question, the idea of the "university without walls" is winning friends.

NOTES

1 Jacqueline J. Adams, "Britain's Open University, Nearing End of Its First Year, Influencing U.S.," Chronicle of Higher Education, November 29, 1971, p. 4. Praise for the Open University has not been universal. Professor Cyril O. Houle, for example, thinks it "the most rigid, inflexible, lengthy, and arduous way to secure a bachelor's degree that the mind of man has yet devised"; and he attributes its success "to the deprivation of higher educational opportunities in the past, to the ready availability of study centers made possible by the concentration of the population . . ., and perhaps to the addiction of the British people to blood, sweat, and tears." From "The Third Era of American Higher Education," in Proceedings of the National Conference on Public Service and Extension in Institutions of Higher Education, University of Georgia (Athens, 1974), pp. 44-45. The open-circuit program in Tennessee does have a good deal of flexibility, which its directors hope to retain in the event that it becomes degree oriented. The belief here is that unless television instruction can remain a convenient alternative to campus residency, it will defeat itself.

2 The Committee on Higher Adult Education of the American Council on Education, "Twelve Issues in Nontraditional Study" (unpublished), p. 1.

3 Ibid.